



DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

news release

Fish and Wildlife Service

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RECORD YEAR FOR WHOOPERS:
CRANE NUMBERS ON THE RISE IN 1992

Record production among endangered whooping cranes means more of the rare birds will make the 2,500-mile trek from Canada to Texas this fall, according the Department of the Interior's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The Service expects about 145 whooping cranes to migrate from nesting grounds in Canada to spend the winter in and around the Aransas National Wildlife Refuge along the Texas Gulf Coast. The number of migrating cranes is up from 1991 when high losses and poor nesting success resulted in only 132 birds making the journey, the first population decline since 1980.

This year, cool spring weather made for improved water conditions in Canada's Northwest Territories, where the rare birds nest. Biologists found that a record 40 pairs nested this year, producing an estimated 35 young. Fifteen to 20 chicks survived and are expected to attempt the long migration, compared to only eight in 1991.

"With a species as rare as the whooping crane, it's encouraging to see the balance tip in its favor," said Service Director John Turner. "Because of their extremely low numbers, the survival of these magnificent birds is precarious. Even a seemingly small increase in population is very good news."

Reduced to only 16 birds in 1941, the whooping crane population is making a slow comeback. The total whooping crane population, including 92 captive birds, stands at about 250, the highest since the birds began to recover. Captive breeding programs at the Service's Patuxent Wildlife Research Center in Laurel, Maryland, and the International Crane Foundation in Baraboo, Wisconsin, have produced a record 27 chicks in 1992.

Whoopers in the wild begin their journey in September and October, travelling for several weeks before reaching the Texas coast. Their route takes them through Alberta and Saskatchewan and the States of Montana, North and South Dakota, Nebraska, Kansas, Oklahoma, and Texas. Along the way, whoopers encounter hazards such as power lines, fences, threat of disease, vandal shooters, and human disturbance while roosting and feeding.

Hunters, photographers, farmers, and others along the cranes' route are asked to keep an eye out for the big birds and ensure they are not disturbed. Adult whoopers are white with black wingtips and a red forehead. They fly with necks straight forward and legs extending beyond the tail. Adults stand about 5 feet tall and sport a 7-foot wingspan. Young birds are white and rusty brown with black wingtips. Anyone spotting a whooping crane is urged to contact local wildlife officials.